Unruly Memory and Historical Order: The Historiography of the French Revolution between Historicism and Presentism (1881-1914)

Memoria Indisciplinada y Orden Histórico: La Historiografía de la Revolución Francesa entre Historicismo y Presentismo (1881-1914)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex history of "undisciplined histories" by looking at the tension between political engagement and scientific detachment in revolutionary scholarship, a field perpetually torn between historicist methods and presentist purposes. From the controversies surrounding the 1889 Jubilee to the patriotic uses of history during the Great War, the historiography of the French Revolution continuously challenged the principles and methods of history as an academic discipline. This period's omnipresence in nineteenth-century "memory wars" delayed its academization, which became effective only in the aftermath of the Centenary when newly implemented university chairs, scholarly journals, and historical societies established the history of the French Revolution as a central research topic. However, the advent of the First World War challenged the historians' impartiality and detachment as they committed to defend their homeland in their historical writings while striving to preserve their intellectual autonomy.

KEYWORDS

Presentism. Revolution. Uses of History.

RESUMEN

Desde las controversias que surgieron con el Jubileo de 1889 hasta los usos para fines patrióticos de la historia durante la Gran Guerra, la historiografía de la Revolución francesa cuestionó continuamente los principios y métodos de la historia como disciplina académica. La centralidad de ese período histórico en las guerras de memoria de la Francia del siglo XIX retrasó su academización, que se hizo efectiva recién al día siguiente del Centenario. La Revolución francesa se convirtió entonces en un objeto de investigación científica, lo que conllevó la creación de cátedras universitarias, revistas académicas y sociedades históricas. La irrupción de la guerra desafió las normas de imparcialidad y distanciación adoptadas por esos historiadores que pusieron sus escritos al servicio patriótico de la causa de su país mientras se esforzaban por mantener su autonomía intelectual. Destacando la tensión entre destacamento y compromiso en la historiografía revolucionaria, en este artículo se muestra la relativa indisciplina de este campo de investigación, perpetuamente dividido entre sus métodos historicistas y sus propósitos presentistas.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Presentismo. Revolución. Usos de la historia.

> *"Certainly, we wanted to be men of science. We felt it was time to address the history of the Revolution, not a source of pamphlets, but with the rules of scientific criticism already in use in the study of earlier periods. […]*
> *We were thus told: 'You are right not to engage in politics.' If this compliment acknowledges that we do not concern ourselves with political parties and officials, we deserve it. By contrast, if it suggests that we study the French Revolution out of pure curiosity, as archaeologists filled with skepticism and indifference, then the assumption is wrong. We are citizens and, when we commit ourselves to the service of science, we serve the Republic as well. Every inch of territory conquered by science is a defeat for theocratic prejudices and a victory for the Republic. As we unveil the origins of modern France, we put the Revolution in a flattering and pure light and make our fatherland even more lovable" (AULARD, 1890).*

This speech delivered in 1890 by Alphonse Aulard, one of the leading advocates for scientific history under France's Third Republic (1870-1940), manifests a structural tension between science and politics in the historiography of the French Revolution. For decades, policy-makers and university authorities refused to incorporate this historical topic into the existing academic curricula because of its controversial character and strategic uses in the French and European memory wars. Thus, by contrast with other sub-fields where the documentary and methodological conventions of late-nineteenth-century *histoire-science* ("scientific history") already prevailed, scholarship on the French Revolution underwent a delayed and problematic academization.

This case illustrates how an "always somewhat anarchic" social memory (LE GOFF, 1993, 43) becomes ordered, rationalized, and disciplined.[1] In this regard, the concept of "(in)discipline" proves to be a valuable tool to illuminate this process. Historians usually resort to the "professionalization" paradigm as a lens to investigate the rise of social sciences, focusing on the breakthroughs that emancipated the respective scientific fields from the realm of amateurism (GUILLEMAIN; RICHARD, 2016). This analytical frame suffering from a structural lack of formal definition and relying on presentist and teleological premises, also tends to universalize the spontaneous sociology of the American "professions" to all scientific configurations (HEILBRON, 1986; CHARLE, 1995). By contrast, the notion of "discipline" appears less monolithic, more suitable for a constructivist perspective, and helpful in avoiding the pitfalls of functionalist legitimism (ABBOTT, 2001; BOUTIER; PASSERON; REVEL, 2006; MARCHAND, 2014; HEILBRON; GINGRAS, 2015). Moreover, this concept's polysemy (to be disciplined/to become a discipline) makes it possible to address both the

[1] On the distinction between "social" and "collective memory" in Maurice Halbwachs' theoretical framework, see BRIAN, 2008.

academization and rationalization of scientific research and the differentiation of fields of knowledge into scholarly disciplines.

In this regard, the relative indiscipline of historical scholarship on the French Revolution appears striking. Within a regime eager to reconcile the French with their entire national past, yet acknowledging 1789 as the nation's point of origin (OZOUF, 1998), revolutionary history allowed for projections into the future. Following the model of *historia magistra vitae*, it also provided an endless collection of *exempla* likely to inform the present. As such, this historical field was subject to agonistic "uses of the past" (HARTOG; REVEL, 2001; BLACK, 2005; ANDRIEU; LAVABRE; TARTAKOWSKY, 2006), for it represented a universal resource in the political and symbolic struggles between opponents and proponents of the regime. The Republic was still young, contested, and thus fragile. Citizens and political activists from all sides kept in memory the dramatic failure of previous French republican experiments. Late-nineteenth-century intellectuals and officials regarded the social memory of the French Revolution as the necessary condition for the survival of the regime, as was made clear by the republican teacher and historian Célestin Hippeau in 1883: "Only the spirit that guided the immortal conceptions of our first Republic can secure the existence of the Republic" (HIPPEAU, 1883, p. 966) .

Promoting research and knowledge dissemination on the French Revolution through teaching, books, conferences, and brochures was thus a political move for citizens eager to shield or bring down the regime, bury or excavate the Crown, and restore or eradicate Catholicism. In a somewhat similar fashion to Reform and Counter-Reform controversies, historical writings on the French Revolution intended to legitimize either "white" (royalist) or "blue" (republican) claims. Each faction identified with its (imagined) ancestors and strengthened its cohesion by cultivating antagonism towards its rivals, thus bringing about a binary dividing line between ultramontanists and free-thinkers, republicans and royalists, patriots and *émigrés*. This article thus illuminates a permanent war and impossible peace within a highly polemical historiographical field. Either determined, as "organic intellectuals" of the regime, to craft a Whiggish and hagiographic history of the republican victories (BUTTERFIELD, 1931) or to elaborate a counter-history favorable to the Old Regime, all historians showed resolve to craft competing narratives of the nation (BLACK, 2014, p. 98): hence their involvement in early forms of "public history" (DUMOULIN, 2003; GARDNER; HAMILTON, 2017) and the striking violence of the resulting historiographical controversies, fueled with antithetical conceptions of political legitimacy and national unity.

From a dialectical standpoint, it is crucial to underline the progressive yet incomplete disciplinization of revolutionary studies initiated in the early 1890s. While its practitioners embraced the principles of scientific historiography, their conception of history-writing remained at the intersection of detachment and commitment nonetheless (ELIAS, 1956). This configuration calls for a distinction between historicism, understood as "the commitment to the understanding of the past for its own sake" (STOCKING, 1968, p. 4), and presentism, a conception of the past grounded in the present.[2] This dichotomy makes it possible to account for both the historians' research approach and their conception of the relationship between past and present (CHAPOULIE, 2005). Historians of the French Revolution combined historicist methods with presentist purposes in the sense that they simultaneously endeavored to comprehend past events in their context without anachronistic preconceptions while striving to illuminate present-day dilemmas and impact the present through the study of the past. By historicizing the connection between presentism and historicism, this article insists on the contradictions of historiographical practices that appeared perpetually torn between their "desire for truth" and their "concern for action" (NOIRIEL, 2010, p. 8).

Presentism and Anachronism, 1881-1889

"Incurably sick with the French Revolution, the nineteenth century kept reenacting it in a dramatic, tragic, and unstable fashion" (SERNA, 2019, p. 192). Although other historical periods have also been subject to political uses, especially for nationalist purposes, none played a part as singular and decisive as the French Revolution in Western social memory. This event's legacy became increasingly contentious in the diplomatic and political spheres as the years got closer to the 1889 Jubilee. After Bismarck declined the invitation to commemorate 1789 in Paris and urged European monarchs to follow his example, Austria, Russia, and Spain effectively defected from the 1889 official ceremonies, while others, like Belgium and Italy, only delegated a modest *chargé d'affaires* (VON BUELTZINGSLOEWEN, 1989; SCHRŒDER-GUDEHUS, 1989). As the commemoration approached, politicized references to the French Revolution blossomed all across Europe. In the Russian Empire, the conservative historian Nikolaj A. Ljubimov published works on revolutionary violence and emigration to feed the public's aversion to the revolutionary turmoil. At the same time, activists deported in Siberia and exiled in foreign countries gave free rein to their messianic ambitions and called upon

2 This definition differs from both the tradition of *Historismus* in the German philosophy of history and the recent reinterpretation of presentism as a particular "regime of historicity" (HARTOG, 2003). Steven Seidman (1983) and Loïc Blondiaux and Nathalie Richard (1999) provide valuable insight into this issue.

the Russian people to emancipate from despotism, following in the footsteps of 1789 France (ITENBERG, 1988, p. 198-219). Meanwhile, the French Revolution remained an inspiring example for Spanish liberals, American republicans, Italian proponents of *Risorgimento*, and Austrian and German social-democrats (DUCANGE, 2014). In early-Third-Republic France, the revolutionary reference served as a heuristic tool and rhetoric resource for competing parties that commonly regarded present-day political struggles as continuing the crisis initiated in 1789.

Revolutionary legacies, symbols, and *memorabilia* were omnipresent in French civil society, to the point of becoming a literary *topos* in the writings of authors such as Balzac, Dumas, and Stendhal (AMALVI, 1989, p. 24). Counter-revolutionary narratives were the cornerstone of the standard aristocratic education (MENSION-RIGAU, 1990) while, on the contrary, republican families passed on revolutionary stories from generation to generation (LE TROCQUER, 2013). French citizens would become familiarized with these competing historical interpretations from an early age. In his memoirs, historian and republican activist Charles-Louis Chassin recalled the ritual battles that would periodically erupt when he was a student at the Paris Bourbon high school in the late 1840s, reenacting the Vendee wars between the "blues" and the "whites."

> The following day, as I entered the school with Buissonnière, who was a day boarder like me, we draped the highest branches of the cherry tree with a gigantic tricolor flag made of pieces of cloth I got from my father's shop and sewed together. […]
>
> Unbelievable screams detonated from the terrace above the schoolyard:
>
> – The flag! Down with the blues! […]
>
> As the 'whites' rushed down the stairs, our rocks flew across the air and disfigured a few faces, but they reached us before the teachers could intervene and tore us to pieces after three minutes of heroic resistance (CHASSIN, 1904, p. 7).

At that time, the revolutionary era, its heroes and relics appeared extraordinarily familiar. Some historians active in the 1880s had met the last living representatives of the revolutionary assemblies in their early years: Alphonse Aulard encountered Thibaudeau in Charente, and Edgar Quinet's parents would regularly invite Baudot to their house (BELLONI, 1949, p. 19; QUINET, 1905, p. 67). In addition, one cannot underestimate the long-lasting effects of revolutionary politics, such as the vast wealth redistribution

that occurred during this decade. Authors of monographs on the revolutionary times were concerned about local reputations and deliberately withheld the names of the families that acquired aristocratic or clerical properties during the 1790s. Eventually, the Revolution provided a practical guide to analyze and orientate present-day politics, which appeared as the continuation of former fights between royalists and republicans, Girondists and Montagnards.

This context could not but affect history writing. Opposite political passions already tainted the "immediate histories" of the Revolution as well as later works published in the following decades under the restored monarchies (MELLON, 1958; LUZZATTO, 1991; BOURDIN, 2008; HARDER, 2008; PETITEAU, 2012). In the 1860s and 1870s, Edgar Quinet and Hippolyte Taine published controversial interpretations of the French revolutionary experiment that revived and intensified the existing divisions (FURET, 1986, LEBLOIS, 2013). The advent of the Third Republic altered the image of the Revolution once more. The regime's official discourse legitimized and canonized this historical event, which was until then a subversive reference monopolized by the opposition to the Bourbon Restoration, the July Monarchy, and the Second Empire. Official efforts towards preparing the 1889 Jubilee spurred even more intellectual antagonism and political polarization (NELMS, 1987; ORY, 1997). Despite the salient fragmentation of the political arena, one can draw a clear dividing line between republican and opposition historians of the 1880s.

In early-Third-Republic France, republican historical networks grouped positivist followers of Auguste Comte involved in the monumental commemorations of Condorcet, Danton, and Diderot, but also free-masons, anti-clerical free-thinkers, and democratic circles of lawyers, professors, journalists, and publicists formerly spearheading the opposition to the Second Empire (NORD, 1995). Among the republican intellectuals and activists who founded the first historical journal dedicated to this period, *La Révolution française*, in 1881, Auguste Dide was a prominent figure of liberal Protestantism and anti-clericalism. The two other co-founders, Étienne Charavay and Jean-Claude Colfavru, were both free-masons committed to glorifying the Revolution and the Republic jointly. Historians from this camp strove to combine scientism and political propaganda (NOIRIEL, 1998, p. 39-40). In his 1886 inaugural lecture, Alphonse Aulard, who held the first chair of the history of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne (TENDLER, 2013; WOLIKOW, 1991), made it clear that he conceived of his teaching as a purely scientific endeavor. Yet, he added this now-famous statement: "Whoever does not sympathize with the French Revolution sees nothing but its surface. To understand it, one needs to love it" (AULARD, 1886, p. 878).

Meanwhile, the champions of counter-revolutionary historiography came from a much more aristocratic and Catholic background. Often involved in local learned societies, they strove to consolidate a collective memory focusing on revolutionary "vandalism," emigration, and religious persecution. Some of these conservative intellectuals contributed to royalist and ultramontane scholarly journals such as the *Revue des questions historiques*. In 1883, autodidact historians Charles d'Héricault and Gustave Bord founded the *Revue de la Révolution* to disseminate their legitimist and religious interpretations of the revolutionary past. In an article published in 1889, one contributor listed the core elements characterizing this journal's ideological environment:

> Joseph de Maistre pronounced the decisive sentence against the Revolution: '*The Revolution is Satanic.*' […] If the French nation has for the past hundred years been unable to make use of the resources that the Providence has pleased to spare us, it is only because free-masonry, a worthy successor to Judaism and supporter of all social and religious assaults against Christendom, confiscated it. The powerful deception of the Revolution is the false doctrine of Equality, the fundamental error of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. Equality, which was Satan's ambition, was also the cause of France's downfall (GIBON, 1889, p. 170).

This agonistic context enabled historians to imagine their political and intellectual engagement in the ongoing memory wars as a filial duty. In 1892, the royalist *Revue des questions historiques* published an article by the viscount of Richemont depicting the current regime as a battlefield between the respective heirs of the victims and oppressors of the Revolution: "as the hateful sons of the executioners awaken, a sacred duty urges the sons of the martyrs to speak up" (DE RICHEMONT, 1892, p. 657). Republican historians displayed similar devotion and piety in their inspired harangues, as evidenced by Célestin Port's preface to his 1888 volume on the history of Vendee: "In my humble heart, I dedicate this book to you, […] O Teacher of justice, O Revolution, my Good Mother!" (PORT, 1888, p. XV).

Historians from both camps showed equal dedication to diffusing their antagonistic conceptions. The 1880s witnessed an overwhelming campaign for moral purification and against subversive readings led by the "Société bibliographique et des publications populaires." This institution of catholic propaganda brought together conservative historians and advanced a counter-hegemony agenda through countless popular publications, images, and tracts representing Joan of Arc and Louis XVI, the conquest of Alger, and the fall of the Bastille (1887a, p. 155). It also provided a forum for renowned champions of the historiographical Counter-Revolution such as Georges de Cadoudal,

Louis Maggiolo, and Maxime de la Rocheterie, whose brochures focused on the history of the Revolutionary Tribunal, the "September Massacres," the deportation of priests, and figures of "popular victims of the Revolution." Meanwhile, their republican counterparts tried to counteract this ideological offensive (AMALVI, 1994, p. 92, 114-116). The "Société d'instruction républicaine" and the "Bibliothèque d'éducation nationale" released dozens of historical brochures composed by republican dignitaries and historians. Although this fact is generally overlooked in the existing literature, traditionally indifferent to the oral vectors of scholarly activities (WAQUET, 2003), historical conferences were a popular vector of historical dissemination under the Second Empire and the Third Republic (CLAVIEN; VALLOTTON, 2007). Auguste Dide was undoubtedly the key speaker for the "Ligue de l'enseignement," a democratic league advocating for public education and secularism. In the 1880s, Dide roamed the country, giving dozens of conferences on Diderot and other precursors of the French Revolution, on secular and compulsory education, and the church under the Revolution and the First Empire.

In addition, historians regarded the past as an instrument useful to wage present-day political wars. They collected colorful depictions of revolutionary events to provide deputies, journalists, and notorious publicists with narratives, anecdotes, quotations, and *exempla* directly usable for ideological battles. In 1889, Alphonse Aulard praised Paul Janet, a philosophy teacher from the Faculty of Letters of Paris, for his recent *Histoire de la Révolution française*. Despite its lack of primary and secondary sources, this *opus* celebrating the social and political output of the Revolution appeared to him as an appropriate answer to contemporary assaults against the regime. Aulard concluded this work should be "brought to the attention of the historian and the politician" (AULARD, 1889, p. 385). Respectively, the reactionary *Revue de la Révolution* provided its readers with a flow of counter-revolutionary (and often apocryphal) anecdotes.

Simultaneously, history writings of the 1880s adopted an anachronistic epistemology contending that events of the French Revolution could shed new light on all contemporary issues. A few years after the Centenary, Aulard made a clear statement on this matter: "Studied through historical sources, the French Revolution can provide the brightest and most relevant insight into our social and political questions" (AULARD, 1893, p. 58). One example of this present-mindedness was the historiographical controversies on the public instruction under the Old Regime and the Revolution encouraged by the 1881-1882 Jules Ferry laws on the republicanization of the school system. Ferdinand Buisson declared in 1882 that the newly-founded "Commission for the publication of the sources on the history of public instruction from 1789 to 1808" he presided "will be beneficial to

history, but also to the Republic and country" (1882, p. 811). On the opposite side of the political spectrum, abbot and diocesan archivist Ernest Allain focused his efforts on demonstrating the absolute failure of the revolutionary education policy. He used the 1789 lists of grievances to argue that, back then, Frenchmen remained loyal to religious orders and Christian education (ALLAIN, 1891).

Benedetto Croce's statement, according to which "all history is contemporary history," appears strikingly pertinent in the case of revolutionary studies. As Oxford scholar H. Morse Stephens noted in his 1886 *History of the French Revolution*, a French historian

> cannot do justice to all the actors engaged in that terrible crisis which is called the French Revolution, and it is not to be expected from him or from any Frenchman for at least a century. Only when the results of the Revolution cease to be burning political questions, and the names of its heroes cease to be flags, round which parties rally, can Frenchmen treat the history of their Revolution with dispassionate calmness (STEPHENS, 1886, p. XVIII).

However, significant changes seemed to be afoot. Despite the entanglements between history-writing and political passions, the creation of university chairs, scientific journals, and historical societies announced the field's imminent academization. Saint-Petersburg historian Nikolai Kareev bore witness to these changes when he prophesized in 1890:

> We can say that the 1880s usher in a completely new era of revolutionary historiography. Amidst the remains of old traditions and revival of outdated standpoints, one can detect clear progress towards greater scientificity in the understanding of the complex and contradictory events that constitute the 1789 revolution (KAREEV, 1890, p. 67).

Restoring Historical Order, 1889-1914

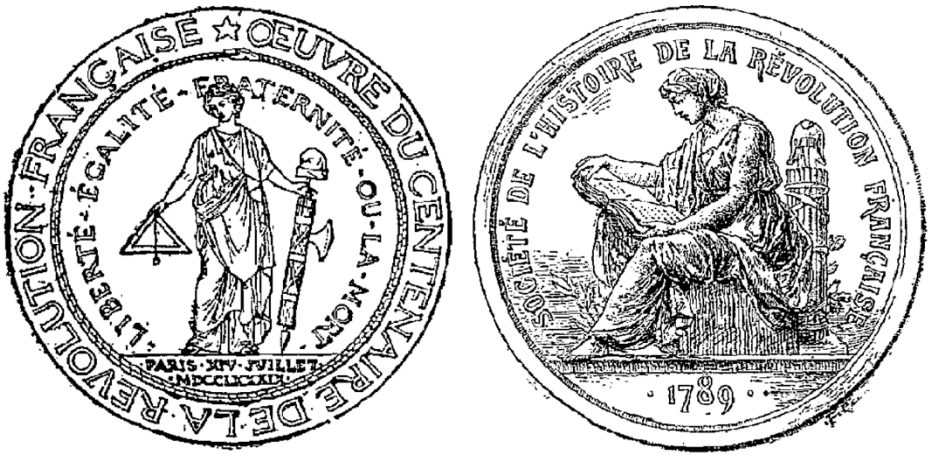
The controversial nature of historical works on the French Revolution was a long-lasting obstacle to its academic and scientific institutionalization. An 1874 circular from the Ministry of Interior and Religion provided that the classification of L and Q series of departmental archives (which comprised sources on the sale of national goods and

materials from revolutionary districts, departments, tribunals, and popular societies) required special cautiousness and moderation from the archivists to preserve local family reputations and refrain from reviving ancient hatred (1874, p. 621). Republican authorities feared the scandals that the slightest reference to the Revolution could cause in university auditoriums, as was the case in 1877 when Saint-René Taillandier, holder of the chair of French eloquence, launched into a tirade against the Terror. His criticism caused the Paris Jacobin youth to disrupt the next lesson to the point of forcing the professor to escape the auditorium under the cries of "Hail to Robespierre! Long live 93! Hail to Victor Hugo! Down with the clerics!" (TAILLANDIER, 1877, p. 119). This subversive potential explains the overall academic and political cautiousness in matters regarding the revolutionary past. Consequently, the first university courses on this issue in Lyon, Toulouse, and Paris resulted from extra-academic initiatives – in this case, from funding by republican municipal councils. When the radical Paris City Hall subsidized Aulard's course at the Sorbonne, the faculty perceived this intrusion as a challenge to the quiet and objectivity necessary for teaching and research. As Aulard himself recalled twenty-five years later, "the new chair had the effect of a barricade at the very heart of the Sorbonne" (1911, p. 361).

Within a decade, the academization of revolutionary historiography reversed the situation entirely. With the support of political authorities eager to combine scientism and republicanism, the French Revolution, once marginal and extra-academic, became a dominant field, well-represented in academic curricula, and respectful of the discipline's scientific norms and scholarly *ethoi*. Henri Carré, Marcel Marion, Albert Mathiez, Philippe Sagnac, and Henri Sée encouraged teaching and research on revolutionary history at the Universities of Poitiers, Bordeaux, Dijon, Lille, and Rennes. The fact that the French Revolution also became a topic in competitive examinations destined to the French pedagogic elite governing the reproduction of the academic body and the content of secondary education was an essential milestone in this field's legitimation (BOURDIEU; SAINT-MARTIN, 1987; CHERVEL, 1993, p. 242-247). At the *École normale supérieure*, where historical culture held the high ground (SIEGEL, 1985), the French Revolution became a subject of examination for the very first time in 1885, to the candidates' surprise and outrage. In 1892, another levee broke when Ernest Lavisse chose a topic on the religious policy of the French Revolution for the *agrégation d'histoire*, a national competitive examination for secondary and (tacitly) university teachers (LAVISSE, 1892, p. 387-388). Meanwhile, a combination of political and intellectual motives led cohorts of students to engage with revolutionary history. From Arthur Chuquet's thesis defense on the 1792 Argonne campaign at the Sorbonne in 1886 to the First World War, works on the French Revolution represented 20% of the

dissertations in history defended in French universities. This development was all the more remarkable since these years saw the transformation of previously "honorary" dissertations into high-value diplomas serving as a showcase for the social and cultural values of the field (KARADY, 1976, p. 79).

Another significant landmark was the creation of historical journals and societies. *La Révolution française* was founded in 1881 as an experimental field to develop scientific methods and epistemology in revolutionary history. Alphonse Aulard achieved the journal's conversion from a republican platform to an instrument of scientific communication. He redefined the periodical's scope when he was named editor in 1887: "*La Révolution française*," he exclaimed, "will emphasize strictly disinterested and scientific research to become the authorized body of all scholars involved in the study of our great national crisis" (1887b, p. 577). While the founders of the original journal issued a new periodical exclusively dedicated to the Revolution's glorification, Aulard established a "Society for the History of the French Revolution." In the immediate aftermath of the 1889 commemoration, he chose a new seal for his journal's front page to put visual emphasis on the ongoing scientific turn.



Until then, the seal had underlined the journal's commemorative and political purposes, with references to the Centenary, the revolutionary slogan "Freedom, Equality, Fraternity, or Death," and an allegory of Justice with fasces, ax, and Phrygian cap. The new effigy was no less feminine but now stressed the quiet and disinterested study of history, symbolized by an open book. A sober "1789" replaced the former allusion to the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789, and the fasces, though within reach and topped by the patriotic cap, were put away in the background.

Historical societies also played their part. When Étienne Charavay first drafted the project of a "Society for the History of the French Revolution" in 1885, he saw it as a "pious and filial initiative" (CHARAVAY, 1885, p. 676). By contrast, the program Aulard effectively implemented three years later meant to "help the scientific methods prevail in scholarship on the history of the Revolution" (1888, p. 950). Eventually, Aulard's society did not become a powerful lever for disciplinary institutionalization, for it remained open to policy-makers and republican officials, in addition to academic historians, and the key institution proved to be, instead, the "Society for Modern History." Historians of the French Revolution had a stranglehold on this society founded in 1901 by Albert Mathiez, who was then finishing his thesis on the origins of the revolutionary cults. The society began its activities under the patronage of Alphonse Aulard and Arthur Chuquet and, later, was practically led by archivists Camille Bloch and Pierre Caron, prominent specialists of the social and economic history of the Revolution. In 1904-1905, the society initiated a historical collection including three dissertations on the revolutionary times, by Albert Mathiez, Léon Cahen, and Pierre Conard. In addition, this learned society assumed strictly scientific and corporative ambitions. Mathiez stated in 1901 that "the Society for Modern History shall recruit its members exclusively among historians or, to put it more clearly, among scholars who study the past following the rules of historical method" (1901, p. 238). The *Société d'Histoire Moderne* acted as the genuine gatekeeper of academic early-modern and modern history, with the explicit purpose of "ruling out any explanation that would not be strictly scientific and rational" (1904a). Its members devoted their meeting to criticizing mainstream history books from the anti-Dreyfusist right and the *Académie française*, uncovering their methodological flaws, and debunking their presentist intentions.

Meanwhile, late-nineteenth-century standards of historiographical debate aimed at "civilizing" the scientific community and uniting it around the search for historical truth. The new disciplinary consensus discarded former emotional and rhetoric excesses as outdated intellectual mindsets and encouraged dispassionate attitudes towards past events. Therefore, like their colleagues, historians of the Revolution endorsed a cult of "objectivity" and "impartiality."[3] Their culture of detachment and self-effacement had its roots in the early-modern "scientific revolution"[4] and was strengthened by *fin-de-siècle* representations of bourgeois masculinity. This intellectual turn was made possible

[3] A consistent body of literature has explored the civilizing process in the early modern Republic of Letters and the cult of objectivity and disinterestedness: Bordo (1987); Goldgar (1995); Solomon (1998); Daston, Galison (2007); Murphy, Traninger (2013).

[4] On sentiments or detachment in science, see Susan James (1997), Amanda Anderson (2001), George Levine (2002), and Jessica Riskin (2002).

by the progressive implementation of what Herbert Butterfield termed "technical histories," systematically relying on historical documents and scientific methods. Modern historian Émile Bourgeois claimed in 1887 that "in its turn, the Revolution should have Benedictines of its own, inspired by the same zeal and the same love for truth and science" (BOURGEOIS, 1887, p. 1029).

Historians specializing in the history of the French Revolution thus adopted the scholarly practices that already prevailed outside their field, such as bibliographical cards (BERT, 2017), footnotes (GRAFTON, 1997), and source editions. Since the early nineteenth century, with the German *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* initiated in 1819 and the French "Collection of unpublished historical documents relating to the history of France" created by François Guizot in 1835 (GUYOTJEANNIN, 2004; SAXER, 2012), legitimizing a research topic usually went hand in hand with searching, inventorying, and editing the corresponding historical sources. From 1881 to 1903, the state and the Paris City Council designed several historical commissions charged with searching and publishing sources concerning the history of the revolutionary decade, such as the "Jaurès Commission," established in 1903 and focusing on documents relating to the economic life of the revolutionary era. The government provided this commission with annual funding of up to 60,000 francs (five times the yearly salary of a professor at the Sorbonne). In less than ten years, this commission released 59 volumes of empirical data dealing, for the most part, with 1789 "*cahiers de doléances*" (lists of grievances) and the sale of national properties (PEYRARD, 2002). Simultaneously, new emphasis was put on the inventorying of departmental sources and general cataloging of manuscripts and prints relating to the history of Paris during the French Revolution. In 1900, Alphonse Aulard drew the most optimistic conclusions on the current state of contemporary scientific scholarship:

> I acknowledge with great pleasure that even the most passionate souls have endorsed the mandatory rule whereby scholars should always rely on historical sources and refrain from writing anything unoriginal. No one dares to write history without first bringing forward their references. We no longer value mere authority. Critical apparatus and mentions of books and archives have become the universal requirements of trustworthiness. [...] Indeed, I believe that a French school in Modern history is already taking shape (AULARD, 1900, p. 485).

This scientific turn required rethinking the link between presentism and historicism. In breaking with former anachronism, historians stressed the value of detachment

from political and social controversies such as the Dreyfus Case that erupted in 1894 and divided the country for more than a decade. Dreyfusist historians did contribute to draft this case's immediate memory. They expertized the controversial documents that started the *Affaire* and engaged in political battles by rallying the Human Rights League and signing petitions supporting Alfred Dreyfus (REBÉRIOUX, 1976; JOLY, 1989; RIBÉMONT, 2005). For all that, historians of the French Revolution knew that both the public and their peers tended to suspect them of partiality. They showed particular resolve to keeping a clear dividing line between their scholarly publications on the one hand and their public interventions on the Dreyfus Case on the other. While personalities such as Alphonse Aulard, Albert Mathiez, or Henri Sée joined the Human Rights League and engaged in Dreyfus' defense publicly, their historical journals maintained a reasonable distance from contemporary issues. The only echo of the Dreyfus Case in *La Révolution française* was quite anecdotic: in 1904, the journal published a ruling of the National Convention requesting the liberation of a Jewish citizen, who went by the name of Simon Dreyfus and was unrightfully held prisoner in Strasburg (1904b, p. 544). Likewise, the *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, although edited by the Dreyfusist *Société nouvelle de librairie et d'*édition, did not directly mention the Case – if one excludes the fact that the journal's very first article was a piece on the Jews and the French Revolution (SAGNAC, 1899-1900). This example shows that historians started to address contemporary controversies by translating them into historical terms[5]. The only polemic that disturbed the quiet of these scholarly periodicals was the 1910-1911 campaign against the Sorbonne and the modernization and democratization of the French higher learning (BOMPAIRE-ÉVESQUE, 1988; SHURTS, 2017). This anti-intellectualist crusade led, among other actors, by the *Action Française*, triggered academic reactions in the daily press – Aulard, for instance, opposed this conservative offensive in *La Justice*, *La Dépêche*, and *L'Aurore* – and historical journals, which can be explained by the anti-academic character of the initial attacks (CARON, 1911).

In the 1890s, historians of the French Revolution addressed the history of socialism in a similar fashion. While conservative sociologists and liberal economists drew on the history of this seminal event to expose the socialist peril, whereas European revolutionaries such as Cunow, Jaurès, Kautsky, and Kropotkine took a fresh look at 1793 to advance the socialist cause, French academic historians assumed an objectivist and detached attitude regarding these battles. They did not adopt this particular disposition out of indifference to the economic and social issues dividing the French society since

[5] Pierre Bourdieu (1997, p. 15-16; 1998, p. 400) described this "refraction" effect as a symptom of a given scientific field's relative autonomy.

many of them were involved in radical or socialist politics. However, they believed that their scientific status required them to avoid the pitfalls of excessive presentism. Historical works by Georges Bourgin, André Lichtenberger, Albert Mathiez, and Philippe Sagnac on the French Revolution's socialist dimension were thus a sign of their present-mindedness, but they manifested historicist axioms nonetheless and refrained from comments on current debates over European socialism that could alter or cloud their judgment (LICHTENBERGER, 1895; SAGNAC, 1898; MATHIEZ, 1905; BOURGIN, 1909). However successful at first sight, this academization process remained fragile and was soon challenged by the war.

The Challenge of the Great War

The Great War was the acid test of these disciplinary certitudes. Historians put their knowledge at the service of the nation by drafting inspiring parallels between 1789 and 1914 to legitimize the Allies' cause. If this agonistic configuration effectively blurred the distinction between history writing, politics, and journalism, it did not result in an absolute subjection of historiography to patriotic purposes.

As recognized authorities in the modern era, historians of the Revolution were even more likely than their colleagues to engage in analogies between the raging war and their research topic. Some of them established a perfect similarity between 1789 and 1914, as did Camille Bloch in 1915, asking before the Society for the History of the Revolution: "Does it not occur to you that the Revolution comes back to life before our eyes in its most durable and substantial aspects?" (1915, p. 175). French historians were all the more inclined to indulge in trans-historical comparisons since, at the same time, nationalist discourses from German intellectuals contrasted the "principles of 1789" (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity) and alternative trinity "Duty, Order, Law" understood as the "ideas of 1914" and characteristic features of the German mind (MERLIO, 1994; DMITRIEV, 2002). French republican historians, for their part, conceptualized the 1914 national defense as a means to preserve the ideals of 1789. The Second Reich's expansion in Belgium, Alsace-Lorraine, Poland, and Bohemia offered them a pretext to present the right to self-determination as a revolutionary invention, now violated by the German aggression. Alphonse Aulard embraced this line of argument in his opening lecture at the Sorbonne on 2 December 1914:

> The preservation of this right is the actual purpose of our war against Germany. For the sake of France and Humanity, this war is the continuation

> of the French Revolution against the warmongering resurgence of the past, against the so-called law of force that Prussian militarism substituted, in the German soul, to the law of reason once supported by Kant and other German philosophers following the French thinkers.
>
> There is more here than simply a connection, a resemblance, or a cause-effect relationship. It is the very same event that is still underway and seems to accomplish its end through this final struggle (AULARD, 1915a, p. 9).

Meanwhile, French historians used Enlightenment thinkers to contrast classical German philosophy and contemporary Prussian culture. In response to the "culture-bearers" (*Kulturträger*) from across the Rhine, whose 1914 "Appeal to the Civilized World" (*Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*) established Kant as an intellectual authority justifying the German military cause, their French counterparts reinterpreted Kant as a pacifist philosopher who would have opposed German militarism and sided with the principles of the French Revolution. André Fribourg, an editor of Danton's speeches and contributor to the *Revue de synthèse*, anachronistically argued that, as an enemy of brutal conquests and military atrocities, "Kant denounced with remarkable accuracy the acts of his compatriots before and during the great war" (HANNA, 1996, p. 133). In a 1915 conference on *The Future of Peace According to the French Revolution and Kant*, Alphonse Aulard interpreted Kant's *Doctrine of Right* and *Perpetual Peace* as the purest expression of the revolutionary ideals and a protest against "Prussianized" Germany's crimes (AULARD, 1915b, p. 111)

Meanwhile, academic historians made the case that the Rhenish people were intrinsically and immemorially French, as purportedly evidenced by their enthusiasm for the principles of 1789 implemented in the ephemeral "Cisrhenian Republic." Albert Mathiez supported the idea of a new annexation of the left bank of the Rhine, drawing on the classical theory of "natural boundaries." In his eyes, the revolutionary precedent was a strong argument for this territorial option: "Regarded as liberators by the people of Palatinate and left bank prince-bishoprics they emancipated from monastic and seigniorial oppression, the proud *sans-culottes* planted Freedom Trees all along the river." (MATHIEZ, 1914, p. 1) Likewise, Mathiez's colleague Philipe Sagnac collected inspiring examples in his 1917 *French Rhine during the Revolution and Empire*, demonstrating how the Rhenish people eager to destroy feudal oppression and benefit from the French revolutionary reforms sided with revolutionaries and supported the French annexation. Last but not least, and although French officials did not establish historiographical propaganda institutions similar to the US *National Board of Historical Service*

(KELLEY, 2006, p. 52), several academic historians placed their historical expertise at the service of the "*Comité d'Études*," where they drafted post-war programs on boundary issues (LOWCZYK, 2009, p. 28).

The war simultaneously blurred the line between scientific journals and political newspapers. The very historians who had turned their back on the general public to secure their academic status now took a new stance on knowledge dissemination and the use of mainstream newspapers. Their chronicles would frequently draw on military, political, and economic events to inspire analogies with the French Revolution. Although aiming at illuminating and affecting the present, their public interventions did not systematically entail presentist conclusions. When he published a chronicle in the socialist newspaper *L'Humanité* on the parliamentary supervision of the war under the French Revolution, archivist Pierre Caron was careful to distinguish his intellectual analysis from present-day politics as he concluded: "We shall not comment further these conclusions relying on simple historical facts. It is up to the Chamber and the government to see whether and to which extent they can be of any use for organizing the parliamentary oversight of our armed forces nowadays" (CARON, 1916, p. 2). By contrast, other historians chose to act differently and take a personal stand on contemporary issues by grounding their political, military, and diplomatic claims in historical parallels from the history of the Revolution. In 1916-1917, André Fribourg, who was wounded and decorated at the beginning of the war, gave regular chronicles to the weekly newspaper *L'Opinion* on ambushed partisans, long queues in stores, the coal crisis, and potato farming during the French Revolution. He did not refrain from criticizing current policies and resolutely turned history-writing into a pretext for presentist considerations. In one of his articles on high meat prices, Fribourg looked at the French Revolution to support liberal economic strategies. He stressed the failures of taxations and other forms of state interventionism in 1790-1795 and maintained that free competition was the best option, then and in 1916 (FRIBOURG, 1916, p. 147-163).

If the Great War undoubtedly marked a major turning point in historical writing, it would be exaggerated to assume that these troubled times obliterated decades of scientific institutionalization. Although historians actively participated in the war's "third front" (PROCHASSON, 2008), they remained anxious to distinguish their status and intellectual dignity from journalists and propagandists and shield themselves from accusations of nationalism and partiality. Faced with this dilemma, historians had no choice but to engage in endless justifications. Alphonse Aulard's book on *The Current War Commented by History*, for instance, started with self-exoneration:

> Moved as I may be by the perils of my homeland, which appears even more lovable now that it seems threatened with death, I never intended to accommodate historical truth to the advantage of France, as Germans accommodate it to the advantage of Germany. [...] If I used history as a guide to convey common-sense truths, it was never at the expanse of history. One does not betray history by looking at similarities that can spare us mistakes (AULARD, 1916, p. VIII).

Historians did not forsake their scientific principles either. Their scientific journals systematically uncovered historical approximations and distortions of the past in contemporary political discourses using the French Revolution. To shield themselves from possible accusations of intellectual dishonesty, they harshly criticized presentist and patriotic misuses of the past. In Albert Mathiez's *Annales révolutionnaires*, the reviewer of a book locating the origins of pan-Germanism in the Middle Ages asked sarcastically: "Why not trace it back to the Great Flood?" (1916a, p. 734) Historian and socialist activist Gabriel Séailles was similarly accused of falsifying the past in 1916 when he tried to stimulate French sympathy towards the Poles by arguing, against all historical evidence, that Poland saved the French Republic in 1793 (1916b, p. 733). Also, that year, when his colleague Marcel Rouff pinned the blame on Germans for the revolutionary wars, Albert Mathiez objected that Marie-Antoinette and the French *émigrés* were equally guilty and concluded: "Let us degrade the Jerries [*les Boches*], so be it. But not at the expense of historical truth" (MATHIEZ, 1916a, p. 303).

The historians' persistent concern for academic and scientific autonomy also explains their resistance to state censorship of historical writings. The available sources make it difficult to measure the actual extent of censorship in a specific field such as history (FORCADE, 2016). However, we know for sure that the "*Bureau de la Presse*" obliterated some excerpts from Mathiez's 1917 work on *The Monarchy and National Politics* criticizing historical flaws in the nationalist historical writings of Jacques Bainville, a historian and journalist from the *Action Française* (WILSON, 1976; KEYLOR, 1979). Mathiez's controversial statements were precisely the ones disregarding former French territorial conquests under monarchies and empires as illegitimate invasions (MATHIEZ, 1917). State control over historical research appeared especially problematic since its victims sincerely thought of their writings as public statements for the objective benefit of their country and spontaneously refrained from publishing anti-patriotic and demoralizing opinions (AULARD 1916, p. VI). In addition, historians formerly involved in the Dreyfus Case remained deeply committed to freedom of speech and resented all kinds of intellectual subjection to the state. As the "Sacred Union" that prevailed in the early years of the war showed its first cracks, several historians of the

French Revolution started to raise their voices against the policy of secrecy the French government adopted during the Great War. Albert Mathiez elaborated on this theme in the newspaper *L'Heure* – resulting in the seizure of all copies and a weekly suspension of the publication (MICHON, 1934, p. 295-296). He compared the current state of affairs with the revolutionary precedent to establish that the National Convention had always resented censorship and secrecy in the conduct of war and politics. Back then, he argued, "all events took place in plain sight and the authorities, whether civil or military, remained under the watchful eye of the public opinion" (MATHIEZ, 1916b). In his view, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety never lost their faith in public freedom and political transparency, in contrast to the 1916 French Government:

> Out of necessity and as a result of domestic and foreign battles, the Convention obviously had to centralize political decision-making, resort to extreme measures, and strike traitors and conspirators with the national ax. However, it never occurred, even at the peak of the Terror, that victory commanded to cover the country with a shroud of silence and mystery, gag every mouth, control every pen, and declare an official truth (1916c, p. 578).

This statement and similar claims for intellectual and political freedom, echoing earlier mobilizations caused by the Dreyfus Case, demonstrate that the historians' will to serve was not absolute and, in their minds, went only as far as necessary to preserve both their country's destiny and the principles of scientific independence.

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In contrast with the 1880s, when republican publicists, aristocrats from learned societies, and clerical or royalist pamphleteers from outside academia used the French Revolution to address contemporary controversies, the next decade witnessed this undisciplined historical topic's academization. A new generation of academic scholars trained in the documentary and critical methods already used in other historical sub-fields operated a radical scientific turn. Although historians still showed deep concern for present-day controversies and political battles, they strove to forsake earlier forms of anachronism and translate these controversial issues into scientific topics. However, the trial of the Great War opened a new period of uncertainty. Historians of the French Revolution were involved in their homeland's moral and cultural defense and eager to participate in the general mobilization actively, but they discarded nationalist excesses, historical falsifications, and official censorship as threats to the scientific

field's autonomy. This retrospective look at past avatars of historicism and presentism provides substantial elements for collective and critical reflections upon the current state of the historical discipline, at a time when global crises and memory wars demand that historians engage in the public sphere without compromising the autonomy and dignity of the *métier d'historien*.

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